

## **WHAT IS THE BIBLE?**

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The English word “Bible” has a long history that leads back to the Nile River in ancient Egypt. The earliest form of paper was made from the stems of a reed that grew along the Nile River called papyrus. The stems were laid across each other and beaten together by a mallet. The papyrus was used to produce a cheap writing material called **biblos**. Over time, this word of Semitic origin was modified and used in Greek, Latin, and then French, until it entered the English language as the word “Bible.”

The Bible is different from any other book in the world for one very important reason: It is the inspired Word of God to man. The Bible says it is “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16). God inspired men to write the message He wanted revealed to man. Over 2700 times the Bible says “the Lord said,” or “God said,” or something similar. Through God’s providence the Bible has been accurately transmitted through time and can be completely trusted. Its powerful message has changed the course of human history in every generation since it was written. It is undeniably and unequivocally the Word of God.

The Bible is not simply one book, but an entire library of sixty-six books. It includes true stories and parables, songs and poetry, laws and rules, sermons and letters, events in history and predictions about the future. The Bible is divided into two parts: the Old and New Testaments. The word “testament” is an ancient word for covenant, contract, or an agreement between two groups of people. The word “testament,” therefore, is a poor translation and should be rendered contract or covenant. The basic structure of the Bible centers on the idea that God has made two significant covenants with His people, and that the New Covenant has displaced the Old.

### **The Languages of the Bible**

The Bible was not originally written in English. It was put together over hundreds of years and written in different languages. Most of the Old Testament is in Hebrew. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters but no vowels. It is read from right to left. A small part of the Old Testament was written in Aramaic. The Aramaic parts are found in Ezra 4:8 to 6:18 and 7:12 to 26; Daniel 2:4 to 7:28; Jeremiah 10:11; and two words in Genesis 31:47. Aramaic came into use about 500 BC after the Jews' Babylonian exile. It is closely related to Hebrew and was the official language of the Persian Empire. It was the common language in Palestine in the first century and would have been the language that Jesus spoke.

The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the common every day language of the people in the Middle East and the countries that were around the Mediterranean Sea at the time of Jesus. Greek was the universal language of the first century.

Although originating in only three languages, the Bible has now been published in over 1750 different languages and dialects. It is the world's most widely distributed book with some 2.5 billion copies printed between 1815 and 1975.

### **The Writers**

The Bible is from God. It is certainly reasonable that the One who created man would desire to communicate with him. He, therefore, inspired men to write His words. The Bible claims inspiration for itself (2 Tim. 3:16). Peter says in 2 Peter 1:21, "Men who were moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Jesus promised His apostles that the Holy Spirit would guide them, teach them, and bring everything He taught them to their memories (Jn. 14:26; 16:12-13). Paul said that he spoke words taught by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). John said the things he wrote were communicated to him by an angel (Rev. 1:1).

God used over forty authors spanning 1600 years to write the Bible. Nevertheless, these writings do not simply cover the 1600 years of their writing, but rather encompass all of man's existence. The Old Testament begins with the creation of the universe and ends with the promise of a coming Messiah. The New Testament begins with the coming of the Messiah and ends with the promise of the destruction of the universe and the promise of heaven.

## **Writing Materials**

Many thousands of ancient texts from Bible times and even earlier have survived until today. We have learned most of what we know about the ancient world by deciphering them. They were written on various materials. For example, the Babylonians used small tablets of clay, while the Egyptians, as has been mentioned, used papyrus. Sometimes important inscriptions were cut into rock, palace walls, or painted on the walls of tombs. In time, cumbersome clay tablets and scrolls of papyrus gave way to more convenient forms resembling our modern books. In about the second century AD the codex replaced the scroll. The codex was made of pages of writing material folded and fastened together at one side, often with a cover. Christians may have been the pioneers of this early book because it made handling and transporting writings easier.

Papyrus was used as early as 3000 BC. It was made of sheets or strips that were connected by beating them together and then rolled up into scrolls. These were the books of Old Testament times. People usually wrote on papyrus with reed brushes using ink made from soot. Parchment and vellum (derived from the English word “veal”) were used later for writing on, and they proved to be more durable and long lasting than papyrus. Vellum comes from the hides of calves and antelopes. Parchment comes from the hides of sheep and goats. These animal skins were cleaned, treated, and smoothed, making a light writing surface. Parchment and vellum were used beginning about the fourth century. The oldest surviving complete manuscripts of the Bible in existence today are written upon vellum.

## **How Did We Get The Bible?**

Jesus said in Mark 13:31, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” If God decided to communicate His will to man, then certainly He preserved it for man.

## **The Old Testament**

It is not easy to discover exactly how the books of the Old Testament came to be written and collected together. Most likely these Old Testament books were preserved and passed on orally long before they were written down. Nevertheless, from the earliest of times, important things have been written down and kept in special places. God told Moses to write on a scroll as some-

thing to be remembered. Moses wrote down God's instructions in "The book of the Law." It was then given to the priests to keep beside the Ark of the Covenant, in the sacred inner room of the tabernacle (Deut. 31:26). The Ten Commandments were carved on stone tablets and kept inside the Ark of the Covenant. Joshua, Moses' successor, also wrote words in the book of the Law (Josh. 24:26). From the time of Samuel, the words and writings of the prophets were recorded and kept for future generations (1 Sam. 10:25; Jer. 36:2). Later generations consulted the writings of their predecessors (Dan. 9:2; Neh. 8:1). By the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, in the fifth century BC, the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was complete and, along with other Old Testament books, had been collected and recognized as authoritative.

By the time of Jesus, all of the Old Testament books were well known and accepted. Formal recognition of the Canon of the Old Testament, however, is linked to the Council or Synod of Jamnia in AD 90. The only Old Testament books under debate for acceptance into the canon at the Council were Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The Hebrew Bible used today contains all the Old Testament books in the Christian Bible, but some are in a different order.

### **The New Testament**

There is much more evidence for the compilation of the New Testament books and letters. Thousands of manuscript copies (some going back to the early centuries A.D.) have been preserved, and from them we can piece together what must have happened. When early Christians met together for worship, they continued to read the Jewish Old Testament, as Jesus had done. Also, those who had known Jesus were asked to talk about Him and to share His teachings. Evidently the first written documents circulating among the churches were the letters written by Paul. These were read and treasured by the people to whom they were written. They were then copied and distributed to other churches that were located nearby (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16). As time passed and all of the eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection gradually died, the church realized that clear accounts of Jesus' life and work must be written down.

While there are no original autographs in existence, manuscript copies are in abundance. The Bible is the most well documented ancient text in the world. We have well over 5,000 manuscript copies of portions of the New Testament. Besides the great number of reliable manuscript copies of the

New Testament text extant today, there are enough references from early Christian writers that a complete copy of the New Testament could be reproduced from their writings alone.

### **What Is The Old Testament About?**

As has already been stated, the basic structure of the Bible centers on the idea that God has made two significant covenants with His people and that the New Covenant has displaced the Old. The Old Testament is nearly twice as long as the New Testament. It begins with the beginning of time and the creation of the world. The Old Testament is a history of God's chosen people, the people of Israel, from the calling of Abraham to when they were conquered and taken as prisoners to Babylon, and finally their return home. From this nation of people, God would bring forth His plan of salvation through the promised Savior of mankind, Jesus Christ. The Old Testament was completed about 400 BC with the writing of the books of Ezra and Malachi.

Our modern English Old Testaments are divided as follows:

1. The first five books are called the Pentateuch, which means "five scrolls." It is really one book divided into five parts. It contains the history of God's people from Abraham to Moses, with an introduction about the very earliest history of all—the creation of the universe and the growth of civilization on earth. It also includes God's rules called the Ten Commandments and detailed instructions about daily living. The Jews call it "The Book of the Law" or "The Torah."
2. The next twelve books are history. They continue the story, beginning with Joshua and his famous battle of Jericho to the invasion and defeat of God's people by the Babylonians and Persians and their eventual return from exile.
3. Next come five books of poetry and wisdom, which contain some of the best-known writings in the world. Job is a drama; the Psalms are poetry and songs for worship; Proverbs and Ecclesiastes contain wise sayings; and the Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) is a love poem.
4. The last seventeen books of the Old Testament are called the Prophets. Sometimes the prophetic books are divided into two groups: the first five are referred to as the "Major Prophets," and the last twelve are called the "Minor Prophets." The terms "major" and "minor" refer only to the length of the writings, not to their relative importance. God called

these prophets to speak to His people to encourage them to worship God and to warn of His punishment when they disobeyed Him and turned to idols. God even enabled some of these men to look into the future and predict what would happen.

### **What Is The New Testament About?**

There is a break of about 400 years between the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament begins with the birth of Jesus and is about the life of Christ and the spread of His church after His death and resurrection. The New Testament was most likely written between 48–95 A.D.

1. The first four books of the New Testament are called “gospels,” meaning “good news.” The aim of all four writers was to tell the story of Jesus before all those who were eyewitnesses of His life died, so that people could have an accurate record based on evidence from eyewitnesses.
2. The next section is a history of the first thirty years or so of the church. Luke (the Greek doctor who went with Paul on his journeys) wrote the story of how the church began and spread throughout the known world. This account generally bears the name “The Acts of the Apostles.”
3. The third division of the New Testament is a collection of twenty-one letters written by Christian leaders (thirteen of them by Paul) to the churches that were springing up all over the Roman Empire. These letters contain Jesus’ teachings, instruction for daily living, encouragement against persecution, warning and correction against wrong living and false teaching, and warm personal greetings.
4. The last book is unique. Revelation, written in poetry and picturesque language and set against the background of Roman persecution, is a series of visions of the future, designed to encourage and inspire the early Christians.

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